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ABSTRACT

In 1997 the Education Commission of the States (ECS) created the Compact for Learning and Citizenship (CLC), an organization of state and district superintendents working to improve student learning through civic involvement and the use of volunteers. This issue paper provides an overview of service-learning, discussing impact, alignment with improving education, civic responsibility, voluntary versus required service, guidelines for effective practice, systems and strategies of support, and resources to integrate service-learning into K-12 schools. Contains 10 references, 10 selected resources, and 6 Web sites. (BT)

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Issue Paper

SERVICE-LEARNING

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SERVICE-LEARNING: EVERY CHILD A CITIZEN

Introduction

In 1997, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) created the Compact for Learning and Citizenship (CLC), an organization of state and district superintendents working to improve student learning through civic involvement and the use of volunteers.

CLC works with states, districts and schools to integrate service-learning into the core of K-12 schooling. The individual and collective efforts of CLC members provide the leadership necessary to help schools make quality service-learning opportunities available to all students and effectively use volunteers to help students improve their academic achievement.

This *Issue Paper* provides an overview of service-learning, impact, alignment with improving education, civic responsibility, voluntary versus required service, guidelines for effective practice, systems and strategies of support, and resources to integrate service-learning into K-12 schools.

What Is Service-Learning?

As part of a whole language curriculum to teach students how to read, kindergartners at Seattle's Hawthorne Elementary School visit monthly with senior residents of a nursing home where they join them in art, games, songs and conversation. When the children return to school, they describe their experiences to parents and other volunteers who transcribe their stories. These stories are made into books for the seniors as well as the school's library.

Service-learning, as defined in the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993:

- Helps students or participants learn and develop by participating in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community
- Is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education or community service program, and with the community
- Helps to foster civic responsibility
- Is integrated into and enhances students' academic curriculum or the education components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled

- Provides structured time for students or other participants to reflect on the service experience.

Educators and community leaders increasingly think involving young people in service-learning activities is a powerful strategy to improve achievement, support school improvement and contribute to community renewal. In service-learning, students relate their service experience directly to their school curriculum, while at the same time making a valued contribution to their schools, neighborhoods and/or communities.

For example, a student in a social studies class who spends time in a homeless shelter tutoring younger children or serving meals develops an emotional and human connection with the course concepts. Homelessness is no longer just a vocabulary word; it is a complex issue with sounds, smells and emotions as well as a lesson in history, geography and economics. Service-learning is not a form of "make work" or simply "students doing good things in the community"; it involves learning and using real academic skills, performing needed service and producing real results that command respect.

Strong evidence exists to show service-learning helps students develop intellectually and into good citizens. When community becomes the classroom and young people learn not just from books but also from their own experiences, they learn basic academic and higher-thinking skills in unexpectedly powerful ways. The motivation to learn is intensified, while opportunities to develop insight and judgment are multiplied. Social growth is advanced. Concern for the welfare of others and the ability to relate positively to a range of cultural backgrounds are encouraged as well.

Both teachers and researchers point out that service-learning also contributes to young people's psychological and moral development. Through age- and developmentally appropriate service experiences, youth can develop not only their sense of personal self-worth and competence but also the sense that they and their work have value in the community. They learn their personal boundaries can span neighborhoods and take in other generations.

Service-learning also provides positive ways for young people to make real contributions to their schools and communities. It helps students take risks on behalf of others, focuses their search for a personal value structure, and supports them as they accept responsibility, especially for their own learning and actions.

Lansing (Michigan) Middle School students learn and apply their basic math skills by sponsoring a market for senior citizens in urban apartment complexes. The markets enable senior citizens to purchase food at reduced cost and interact socially with the younger generation. Students buy food, transport it to the complex, measure, weigh and price the items, and assist the seniors in carrying and putting away groceries.

This unique lab experience is enhanced through related assignments where students practice their basic skills by comparison shopping, weighing and measuring goods, and totaling predetermined orders from shut-in senior citizens. Improved class attendance, parent letters and student remarks show service-learning is motivating and teaching low-achieving students.

What Impact Does Service-Learning Have?

A 1995-96 study of more than 1,000 service-learning students from Learn and Serve America evaluated the program's impact on participants, cooperating community organizations and institutions, and communities. Programs in seven middle schools and 10 high schools in nine states were examined. Projects ranged from tutoring and serving as teacher aides, to working in nursing homes and adult day-care centers, to constructing and improving neighborhood parks.

The impact on student participants included the following:

- Students involved in service-learning scored significantly higher on four of 10 evaluation measures: school involvement, grades, core-subject grade averages and education aspirations. Less significant but still impressive impacts were shown in overall gradepoint averages, course failures and students' assessments of their own capacity to succeed in school.

- Participants showed significant gains on measures of civic participation, such as personal and social responsibility, acceptance of cultural diversity and leadership (defined as being aware of social needs, able to develop and implement a project to meet those needs, and professing a commitment to service).

- Students involved in service-learning were 30% more likely to have been involved in some form of service in the past six months than other students. They provided 2.6 times more hours of service — an average of 107 hours — than students in the comparison group.

- High school students showed significant gains in psychological maturity. In addition, there was some indication that participation in service-learning, combined with other factors, may reduce risk behaviors associated with teen pregnancy.

- All students benefited, regardless of gender, race, economic or education classifications.

What Role Does Service-Learning Play in Improving Education?

As part of an English composition writing assignment, juniors at Edward Little Franklin High School in Auburn, Maine, envisioned what they would like to do with the "snake path," an underdeveloped, sometimes dangerous half-mile-by-400-yard wilderness region owned by the school. Based on their interests, the students formed teams to research and make recommendations. With their teacher, the city planner and a landscape architect serving as consultants, the teams interviewed students and community residents, drafted proposals and developed consensus through team debates. The result was a 50-page master plan for the property, now called "E.L.F. Woods," produced by the school's English classes.

The plan proposed landscaping and forest management, a cross-country course, an obstacle course, a mountain biking trail, and resurfacing and lighting a 500-yard walkway. Students presented the plan, including scale drawings, cost estimates, timelines, and construction features and materials, to the student body, school board and city council, all of which voted approval. To assist in the project's implementation phase, the council allocated $15,000 of its federal community development block grant funds. In addition, a concrete company committed fixtures for park benches, picnic tables and lighting supports.

Through their participation in the municipal planning process, students strengthened their research, writing, oral presentation and math skills while exercising their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

"*Service-learning has to do with powerful purposes — getting kids into the world. Jean Piaget says schooling isn't worth anything unless it creates for people the capacity to believe that when they leave school, they can change the world. If our kids don't believe they can change the world, then I think we ought to say that our education has not been powerful enough.*" Vito Perrone, director, Teacher Education Program, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1992, Council of Chief State School Officers' Service Learning Conference, Racine, Wisconsin

For the past five years, states have been aggressively developing and implementing challenging content standards and curriculum frameworks. At the heart of all this work lies the goal of helping all students learn and achieve at high levels. To succeed in this endeavor, however, requires rethinking not only "what" students learn but also "how" they learn it.

Service-learning also has to do with what Vito Perrone calls "powerful purposes." It addresses the issue of academic relevance by connecting academic knowledge, skills and concepts with accomplishing an "authentic purpose" in the school and community. In this context, service-learning is an integral part of school improvement and contributes to that effort in the following ways:

- **Grounded in how learning occurs:** Service-learning meets a criterion of school improvement that often is missed. While improvement efforts often focus on financial, political or administrative solutions to education problems, service-learning is rooted in a sound understanding of education itself, taking its cue from how cognition and learning actually occur. Service-learning embodies the belief that knowledge is not merely transmitted from teacher to learner, but rather is gained by the learner through guided interaction with the environment.

- **Develops critical thinking skills:** Through service-learning, students learn to reflect on their experiences and develop critical-thinking skills, such as the ability to bring disparate elements of experience together in meaningful ways, to analyze information for patterns and deeper meaning, and to make evaluations and judgments.

- **Benefits all students:** Because it is an effective pedagogy and not specific to any one curriculum, service-learning supports and deepens the existing curriculum and aligns with national and state standards already in place. No group gets singled out because every student can benefit.

- **Uses multiple intelligences:** Service-learning engages the multiple intelligences identified by Howard Gardner, a core idea in education improvement, especially in curriculum development efforts. Service activities and corresponding reflection can be organized to address multiple ways that students learn. For example, students working with residents in a senior center can read aloud to the seniors, engage them in physical exercise and/or discuss historical events. Student reflections can range from creating a portfolio or journal, writing a song or delivering a speech.

- **Makes real-world issues part of education:** Service-learning presents students with issues and problems that cannot be neatly defined or solved. Encouraging students to "think outside the box" fosters development of problem-solving skills.

- **Interdisciplinary learning is encouraged:** Because service-learning requires students to think across the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines, students become more adept at integrating and applying what they are learning.

Service-learning also reinforces school improvement in other ways:

- **Develops workplace skills:** Service-learning experiences early and regularly in a student's education help to foster the development of important skills and positive attitudes toward work and the community. Research shows students learn best when they use interdisciplinary concepts and processes to solve ill-defined problems; function as members of multiple groups; use documents and sources of information other than textbooks; create products others can use; relate the work of the classroom to the world outside the school; influence and shape the course of their own learning; and model their performance upon that of competent adults. High-quality service-learning embodies these elements and provides students with rich and positive learning experiences that help prepare them for the world of work.

- **Promotes equity:** By facilitating heterogeneous grouping, service-learning allows students from a variety of backgrounds, ethnic groups, strengths and abilities to work together on real problems that provide unity and purpose beyond the classroom. It also has been found to provide extrinsic motivation for at-risk students, help special-education students develop concrete skills and competencies which often enable them to work alongside their nondisabled peers, and provide a holistic approach that can help immigrant students learn English language and culture.

- **Fosters appreciation for cultural diversity:** Service-learning helps foster in students a greater understanding, appreciation of and ability to relate to people from a wide range of backgrounds and life situations. It provides opportunities for youth not just to reach out to others but also to understand the value of differences among individuals and communities.

- **Promotes changes in school culture:** Service-learning can have a profound effect on the school culture because it creates new relationships between schools and communities. At the same time, the community itself becomes a learning environment that benefits from the schools that its tax dollars support. Service-learning also can create more collaborative relationships among teachers, administrators and other school personnel. When all members of the school community gradually become participants in this new process of learning, they develop a personal and collective stake in making something positive happen beyond the walls of the school.

How Does Service-Learning Contribute to Civic Responsibility?

The foundation on which the United States was built is achieved only when all citizens are included in choice and decisionmaking. Yet many young people feel alienated from the communities in which they live and attend school. Richard Battistoni and William Hudson write in their introduction of *Experiencing Citizenship: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Political Science*, published by the American Association for Higher Education:

> " . . . service-learning in a democracy — whatever its particular connection to courses or the curriculum — must be seen as a crucial aspect of civic responsibility: a model of the relationship between rights-bearing citizens and the many communities to which they belong. To be a citizen is not merely to possess knowledge of government and its workings or to have legal rights; it is to take responsibility, to see our interests and ourselves as flourishing only as our community flourishes."

Participating in high-quality service-learning activities can help develop many of the skills and competencies associated with good citizenship. Through service-learning, students learn about their community and the people, processes and institutions that are most effective in improving community conditions; develop the social, political and analytical skills necessary to participate in the policymaking process at any level of political and community life; and foster within themselves and among their peers attitudes regarding the value of lifelong service for the common good.

Service-learning also provides students with the opportunity to practice basic citizenship skills such as expressing opinion, speaking in public, organizing groups and thinking critically about political issues.

Should Service-Learning Be Voluntary or Required?

A number of school districts and one state have mandated that students perform specific numbers of hours in community service prior to graduation. A great controversy, however, exists regarding such requirements. For example, mandatory service can motivate students who normally might not volunteer. On the other hand, voluntary service attracts students who truly are committed to service and is more manageable as a program since fewer students are involved.

Over the years, service-learning practitioners and advocates have written that making service mandatory is a contradiction in terms and, while it may sound good, is unrealistic. Before states or school districts move to make service a requirement for graduation, policymakers and communities must examine both sides of the issue and consider how to make service-learning an effective learning tool. (This issue will be explored in depth in a later paper.)

What Guidelines Are There for Effective Service-Learning?

Because service-learning increasingly is recognized as a significant teaching and learning methodology, several organizations have identified essential elements for effective programs. The guidelines below incorporate the key points of these elements. Effective service-learning does the following:

- Strengthens academic learning through practical experience and application of theoretical concepts
- Involves researching school and community problems
- Involves developing service activities and/or projects that address real problems in the school and community
- Involves youth in all aspects of the process
- Works to build problem-solving partnerships between the school and community, as well as within the school and community
- Includes guided reflection time for students to think, talk and write about what they did and saw.

(Adapted from Principles of *Good Practice in Combining Service and Learning*, National Society for Experiential Education, 1989, and *Standards of Quality for School-based Service-Learning*, Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform, 1993.)

How Can States and Communities Support Service-Learning?

KIDS Care in the Culver City (California) Unified School District involves students in service-learning activities, including restoring the Ballona Wetlands, raising trout for release in Piru Creek and organizing a schoolwide collection of items needed by homeless people. The district supports its service-learning initiative with money, time and resources. Funds are allocated from its Mentor Program, the state's professional development fund and the Goals 2000 budget for staff development. The district commits a small percentage of its assistant superintendent of educational services' time, eight principals and eight secretaries to support service-learning. It also provides bus transportation to activities. (Service-Learning Linking Classrooms and Communities, *California Department of Education, 1999)*

State-Level Support

State education agency leadership is essential in expanding the use of service-learning in schools. State policymakers can use the following strategies to support local school-based service-learning initiatives:

- Designate a key state education agency staff person to *coordinate statewide service-learning initiatives,* including such capacity-building exercises as professional development for teachers and administrators, materials development, student assessment, and program evaluation and documentation. This person can work with other state directors within the state education agency to coordinate and connect service-learning initiatives with other federal and state education programs.

- Work with school districts and teacher education institutions to develop and offer *preservice and inservice training opportunities* for teachers and administrators throughout the state.

- Provide a *forum* for, and help educate, state boards of education, commissions for national service and legislators about service-learning and the need to create and improve standards for high-quality school- and community-based service-learning.

- Assist local districts in *monitoring, evaluating and reporting* on the effectiveness of their service-learning activities and programs.

- Sponsor or cosponsor *regional seminars* for principals and district-level administrators on strategies for: (1) using service-learning in state, local and national school improvement efforts, (2) assessing the impact of service-learning on academic performance and (3) developing partnerships among public schools, community organizations and institutions of higher education.

- Help develop and support a *statewide network* of experienced service-learning educators. These educators can help other educators expand the use of service-learning as a strategy for education improvement.

- Develop and disseminate *written policies* endorsing the integration of service-learning into the academic curriculum.

Local-Level Support

Service-learning cannot be sustained without support from schools, communities and school districts. Developing and carrying out local strategies and policies, such as those suggested below, can help to ensure service-learning is integrated into school academic programs. To provide support at the local level, schools, districts and communities can do the following:

- Use existing staff development funds and program structures to support professional development opportunities in service-learning and related topics for teachers.

- Incorporate time into the school day for teachers to meet with colleagues, both in the school and in the community, for planning, program preparation and professional development.

- Develop a recognition or reward plan, or both, for teachers who give their personal time for professional growth, planning, preparation and delivery of service-learning activities.

- Develop a school schedule, for example, through block scheduling, that supports academically based, experiential, service-learning activities for all students.

Sources Supporting Service-Learning in States and Communities

- **National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993** — This act created and funds the Corporation for National Service, which supports service-learning through Learn and Serve America (formally called Serve America under the National and Community Service Act of 1990). Learn and Serve America is a competitive grants program for establishing elementary, secondary, postsecondary and community-based service projects.

- **Improving America's Schools Act of 1994** — Service-learning is included as an allowable use of funds in the following programs under this act: Title I Schoolwide Programs; Title II Dwight D. Eisenhower Professional Development Program Parts A and B; Title IV Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities; Title X Programs of National Significance, including Part A Fund for the Improvement of Education, Gifted and Talented Children and Civic Education. (Efforts are under way to include service-learning as an allowable activity in additional titles and programs in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.)

- **Private Foundations** — Although major private foundation support for school- and community-based service and service-learning has slowed since enactment of the National and Community Service Trust Act, private foundations still remain a significant funding source. In recent years, more local and regional foundations also have begun to support local efforts in service-learning.

- **State Policies** — Several state policy initiatives support and encourage school-based service-learning. These policies primarily call for linking service-learning with education reform initiatives. They do not provide funding support specifically for service-learning activities at the local level.

For more Information

The Compact for Learning and Citizenship (CLC) provides K-12 school leaders, legislators and other education stakeholders with resources, profiles and strategies to integrate service-learning through practice and policy. District superintendents and chief state school officers are invited to join. The CLC Web site (www.ecs.org) also provides links to other organizations, clearinghouses and resources. Contact Terry Pickeral, project director, at 303-299-3636 or tpickeral@ecs.org, or Lou Myers, project coordinator, 303-299-3644 or lmyers@ecs.org.

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Web Sites

Constitutional Rights Foundation
www.crf-usa.org

Corporation for National Service
www.cns.gov

Education Commission of the States
www.ecs.org

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse
www.nicsl.coled.umn.edu

National Youth Leadership Council
www.nylc.org

National Dropout Prevention Center
www.dropoutprevention.org

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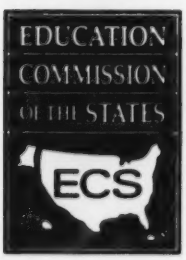

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